

THE MINISTER'S NEPHEW

Lita was late at church that evening. It was rather an ordinary occurrence for Lita to be late. Somehow her bonnets were never in order, her gloves never mended. There was always a splash to be cleaned off the lower portion of her dress, a hole to be darned in her shawl, a missing scarf to be accounted for.

"I wish I were a man," said Lita. "Men are never bothered about their clothes."

"Men have to look decent, I suppose," said Grandmother Allan scathingly.

"Oh, but it isn't such a dreadful trial to them," said Lita, tossing her gloves around in the vain search for a pair that would be mated.

The pair could not be found; so Lita went to church with her hands under her shawl, and slunk guiltily into a back seat, directly under the organ gallery, where she could hear the sweet tone of the music and see everything without herself being seen.

"I should like to have had a respectable pair of long-wristed tan gloves," thought Lita, "and sit up in front. Because the new minister is preach, and I should like to get some sort of an idea of him."

It was a sultry summer evening, the clusters of lamps around the wooden pillars outflaring the seven stars in the July heavens, the heated atmosphere of the church contrasting unpleasantly with occasional whiffs of wild rose scented air from the outside world.

And, late as Lita was, she had the satisfaction of knowing that there was some one even more tardy than herself. A pleasant looking young man, with clear, hazel eyes, hair waving lightly at the ends, and an unbecoming suspicion of the sunburn on his face, was presently shown into the pew by the cross old sexton, who affected entirely to ignore its other occupants.

"Perhaps he really doesn't see me," said Lita to herself. "He is growing blinder every day, poor old fossil, and one glass of his spectacles is cracked clear across."

And Lita looked at the cross old sexton with the gently contemptuous pity which is a natural tribute from blooming dimpled eighteen toward white haired eight and sixty.

Now Lita was very pretty, with her blue, laughing eyes fringed with long, thick lashes, like curtains; cheeks as red as the sweet williams in the church yard; and bright brown hair, threaded with changing gleams of red gold, which grew so thick that hair-pins would scarcely keep it up, and it had to be fastened in its place under Lita's hat by an antique shell comb, studded with little balls, which had been worn by Grandmother Allan when she was a young girl.

And the other person in the pew, chancing to look that way, thought what a lovely vision she was!

"The ideal village maiden," he said to himself, "with such a sweet, saintly look in her eyes, too! It makes one think of Longfellow's poems:

"Her face is like the angels,
And her heart is pure as they."

I wonder who she can be?"

While Lita, darting an occasional glance at him from beneath the silky waving of her long lashes, thought: "Who is he, anyhow? Most likely one of the traveling salesmen from the Eagle Hotel, or perhaps a book agent or a lightning rod man."

Alas, how keenly would handsome Frank Dewey's pride have felt these careless comments could he have known their nature!

And then she left off troubling her head about him and settled comfortably back in the corner of her pew, yawning now and then as the bald-headed, elderly preacher gradually lost himself among his "seventies" and "eighties."

But all of a sudden Lita's eyes sparkled. She whisked a pencil out of her pocket, and began slowly to sketch something on the fly-leaf of her hymn book—for this wicked little sinner was just enough of an artist to be able to jot down some similitude of whatever took her capricious fancy.

And as she drew, with her book safely hidden under the projecting moulding of the pew rail, her companion watched her neck curiously forward to see what she was about.

"A touch of nature makes the whole world kin," says the poet; and Lita tipped the book so that the unknown could catch a glimpse of her mischievous work.

It was the old preacher himself—his Roman nose slightly exaggerated, his bald head given perhaps an undue preponderance, but still the old preacher—so comically rendered that the unknown could not but smile behind his heavy brown mustache.

She looked archly at him; he nodded imperceptibly, and, taking the pencil from her hand, added one or two touches—in themselves insignificant, but giving a marvelous character to the sketch—before he gave it back.

All of a sudden the old man reverently closed the manuscript leaves of his sermon, the choir burst into a sweet and simple hymn, and Lita remembered where she was, blushed to the very roots of her hair, dropped the hymn-book in her consternation and groped blindly for it on the floor.

"What have I been doing?" Lita asked herself.

And she tore out the offending fly-leaf and thrust it down to the very bottom of her pocket, with a lightning frown at the possible salesman who sat demurely at the end of the pew.

Lita could be very haughty, when as Grandmother Allan expressed it, "the evil one took possession of her," but she had a conscience, nevertheless, and it pricked her sorely now.

She brushed haughtily past the unknown as she went out of the church; and she had almost a mind to wait and beg the old clergyman's pardon as he emerged from the robing room; but then she remembered that this

might perhaps involve embarrassing revelations, and another of Grandmother Allan's axioms occurred to her mind.

"Better let well enough alone," she was a good deal quieter that week, however, and so much better behaved, that her father remarked casually that "the child was really getting quite decent."

Poor Lita! it was dreadful to be regarded as the family scapegrace.

On the unlucky Friday, however, old Mrs. Hodges came in with her knitting-work and snuff box.

"I suppose you've heard the news, Mrs. Allan?" said she. "Someone's been makin' caricatures of old Mr. Dewey, the new minister, in a hymn-book, and the sexton was fool enough to show it to him, and he's dreadful put out about it."

"Bless me!" said Grandmother Allan, dropping the knife with which she was peeling peaches for tea.

"I sent it myself," nodded Mrs. Hodges, "and for all its such a Sodom and Gomorrah sort of thing, you couldn't help but laugh, it's done so cute, with his book nose and spectacles complete, and even the very wart on his chin."

Lita, who was making up pink ribbon bows in the next room for a dress she was to wear on the following day at a tennis party, felt herself turn pale.

Involuntarily she put her hand down in her pocket and pulled up the crumpled fly-leaf of a hymn book; but, alas, a blank one!

It was all as plain as daylight to her now—she had dropped the book and picked up another one in its stead, leaving that horrible piece of circumstantial evidence to bear witness against her.

"There's one comfort," she thought. "Nobody can know it was me."

In which speech it will be seen that the morals and the grammar were deficient.

She went to the tennis party the next day, and took her first lesson in the knowledge that Fate is sure, sooner or later, to overtake a criminal.

Almost the first person she saw was good old Mr. Dewey with his bald head and eagle nose.

"So this is Miss Lita Allan," said he, beaming kindness on her scarlet face through his spectacles. "I am glad to see you, my dear—very glad!"

"But he wouldn't be," thought Lita, "if he knew what a wicked, sacrilegious, abominable thing I had done."

She had hardly murmured some almost inaudible piece of insanity, when she was called across the lawn by Miss Flora Fortesque, one of the radiant young hostesses.

"Come here, Lita," cried Miss Fortesque. "I'm going to assign you to one of the very best players I know—Mr. Frank Dewey, from Yale College, our new minister's nephew. Miss Allan, let me introduce Mr. Dewey to you."

And to her infinite horror and dismay, Lita found herself looking directly into the roguish hazel eyes of the unknown who had shared with her the pew under the organ loft that night when she so far forgot herself and the place she was in.

"How do you do?" said Mr. Dewey, lifting his tennis cap.

"How do you do?" murmured Lita, feeling as if every drop of blood in her body had rallied to her two cheeks, and was there hoisting danger signals.

"I've known you by sight for some time," said the young collegian. "But this is the first time I could get introduced. I am so glad!"

Lita knew perfectly well that she ought to say something, but words failed her in this emergency. She could only look at Mr. Dewey in a frightened, idiotic sort of way.

"Really, though," he went on, "I feel quite well acquainted with you. That bit of pencil idea, you know—"

"Oh, don't!" almost shrieked poor Lita.

"But, why not?" said Mr. Dewey, with engaging frankness. "Of course, it's all between ourselves. You know, of course, that there's a lot of fuss been made about it. Not by my uncle, though. Bless his dear genial heart, he sees the fun of the thing as well as you did!"

"And—and he was your uncle!" gasped Lita.

"And the dearest old uncle in the world, too," nodded the collegian. "But a joke is a joke, and I'd have cut my tongue sooner than to betray you, Miss Allan. And really, as Uncle Norman says, the likeness is something startling."

"You haven't told anyone?" faltered Lita.

"Not a soul."

"And will you keep the secret?" "With my life. Here's a bit of pink ribbon that has dropped off your frock. Tie it into the buttonhole of my waistcoat, and consider me your true and loyal knight from this time forth for evermore."

Infinitely relieved, Lita did so; and not until she was Mrs. Frank Dewey, two years afterward, did the old minister know all about the eventful Sunday evening when the scapegrace of the family drew his picture on the fly-leaf of her hymn book.

He laughed and forgave her. Not so Grandmother Allan.

"A wicked and sinful thing!" was her comment.

"But if it hadn't been for that, grandmother," pleaded Lita, "I never would have been such good friends with Frank. And he always declares that from the time he tied the pink ribbon in his buttonhole we were engaged."

"Nonsense!" said Grandmother Allan. But Lita knew better than that.

For those few people who have not seen Dr. Arthur Sullivan it may be worth while to present this photograph: He is of the medium height and is moderately stout; his features are small and intelligent; his expression full of mind and humor; his eyes are very dark and bright, and his closely-cut hair, beard and mustache are black.

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